DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 437 IR 057 708

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TITLE	RVIB Library & Information Services--Services to Children.
PUB DATE	1999-08-00
NOTE	6p.; In: IFLA Council and General Conference. Conference Programme and Proceedings (65th, Bangkok, Thailand, August 20-28, 1999); see IR 057 674.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla65/papers/028-121e.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Information; Braille; Children; *Childrens Libraries; Foreign Countries; *Information Services; Library Materials; Public Libraries; *Special Libraries; *User Needs (Information); Users (Information); *Visual Impairments
IDENTIFIERS	Australia (Victoria); *Royal Victorian Inst for the Blind (Australia)

ABSTRACT

RVIB (Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind) Library & Information Services is one of five business units of RVIB, an agency that has been providing services since 1866 to people in Victoria (Australia) who are blind or visually impaired. RVIB Library & Information Services offers four core services: (1) a public library service that includes collections of audio and Braille books, e-text books, audio magazines, newspapers, and audio described videos; (2) a reference and research service for people with print disabilities and RVIB staff; (3) a student and vocational support service that provides curriculum materials to support students at all levels, those in the workforce, and others with particular and urgent information needs; and (4) a special transcription service that produces personal and ephemeral materials in the format of choice. Services specifically designed to support children include materials for children, activities for children, the Partners Program that enables people with print disabilities of all age groups to access information and reading materials through their local public library, and student support services. RVIB has recently renewed its commitment to the provision of materials in Braille through the adoption of recommendations of a committee to evaluate its provision of services and materials to Braille readers, both children and adults. (MES)

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ED 441 437

65th IFLA Council and General Conference

Bangkok, Thailand, August 20 - August 28, 1999

Conference Proceedings

Code Number: 028-121-E
Division Number: III
Professional Group: Libraries for the Blind
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 121
Simultaneous Interpretation: *Yes*

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RVIB library & information services - services to children

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Paper 1

INTRODUCTION

RVIB Library & Information Services is one of five business units of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB), a specialist blindness agency which has been providing services to people in Victoria who are blind and vision impaired since 1866.

The library service has operated since 1934 and today provides services to people with print disabilities, including blindness and vision impairment, in Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Queensland.

RVIB Library & Information Services offers four core services:

1. A public library service, which includes collections of audio and braille books, some e-text books, audio magazines, newspapers and audio described videos available for loan;
2. A reference and research service for people with print disabilities and for the staff of RVIB.
3. A Student and Vocational Support Service which provides curriculum materials to support students at all levels, those in the workforce and others with particular and urgent information needs. Materials are provided from our own collections, from the collections of other libraries, both in Australia and overseas, or through our own new production.
4. A Special Transcription Service which produces personal and ephemeral materials in the

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format of choice.

RVIB Library and Information Services operates as part of the public library network of the State of Victoria, and as such receives some core funding through the Victorian State Government, Department of Infrastructure, Office of Local Government.

Access to additional funding is available through Network Services of the State Library of Victoria, and also from this source RVIB Library & Information Services, with other Victorian public libraries, has been provided with computer equipment and low cost Internet access.

Over the last decade much work has been has done to integrate special format library services with mainstream public library services. This trend is continuing, to the benefit of both service streams and their users.

This direction was first set through Arts Victoria and the work done by the State Advisory Committee on Library Services for People with Disabilities, and currently continues through the Office of Local Government and the Statewide Disability Project Advisory Committee auspiced by Network Services of the State Library of Victoria.

There have been a number of successful co-operative projects between specialist libraries and mainstream public libraries which have fostered the move towards integration and improved services to people with disabilities in Victoria.

A number of these projects are described below and serve to illustrate how the support of our State Government for co-operation between these library sectors has resulted in improved choices for, and improved services to people with disabilities, and has set the scene for resource sharing and a level of service provision not seen elsewhere in Australia.

SERVICES TO CHILDREN

RVIB Library &Information Services has a number of services specifically designed to support children:

1. Materials for children

The library maintains a collection of tape and text books (originally funded through Arts Victoria). These kits are available, singly or in bulk, for loan to mainstream public libraries, school libraries and to individuals. Some of the audio versions of the books have been recorded at slower than normal speeds to assist children with learning or intellectual disabilities to follow the print while listening to the audio at a speed which suits their reading abilities.

2. Activities for children

Children with print disabilities are eligible to use all our services and our collections include materials for children, including children's magazines, Directorate of School Education magazines and books in audio and braille, as well as children's audio described video titles.

Children using RVIB library services are eligible to participate in children's activities initiated through the public library network. Through us, children have taken part in the annual Statewide Summer Reading Scheme, which is a summer holiday activity designed to encourage reading. Children with print disabilities also participate in activities such as the MS Readathon - an annual children's reading competition for which children seek personal sponsorship and funds raised support research into multiple sclerosis.

4. Partners Program

In co-operation with Eastern Regional Library Services, at their library in Ringwood, an outer Eastern suburb of Melbourne, RVIB has recently established the "Partners Program", which enables people with print disabilities of all age groups to access their information and reading materials through their local public library should they choose to do so.

This concept was originally the brainchild of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind and we have shamelessly copied it for our own use.

The Partners Program, as it operates in Victoria, makes use of the adaptive technology (such as large monitors, synthesized-voice screen readers etc.) which has been installed in Victorian public libraries, coupled with Internet access to provide those with print disabilities with access to the RVIB catalogue and book ordering facility.

Should people in the area opt to access RVIB library services through Ringwood Library, staff at the library are able to operate on the records of those registered borrowers.

Materials ordered may be sent to Ringwood Library for pick-up or direct to the borrower's home.

A number of borrowers and volunteers have also been trained in the use of the equipment, including the screen reading software and are available to help new users should they require assistance.

Although this project is in its early stages, interest in participating has been expressed by a number of people with print disabilities and by other public library services.

Student Support Services

RVIB operates a special school, with some reverse integration, for children who are blind and also have other disabilities.

RVIB also provides support services to children who are blind, attending mainstream schools, through its Visiting Teacher Service and Resource Bases attached to mainstream schools.

Children who are blind and studying in mainstream schools attend the RVIB school "Support Skills" program several times each year. The Support Skills Program offers an opportunity for students to mix socially with other students who are blind, and to gain disability specific skills such as the learning of braille music or the interpretation of tactile representations of print graphics.

RVIB Library & Information Services supports students with print disabilities in a number of ways:

- The staff at the RVIB school utilise RVIB Library &Information Services to teach children who are blind research skills and general library search skills. The students are encouraged to telephone Library &Information Services with reference queries which Library & Information Services staff answer over the phone, and, when necessary, send material to students in the format of their choice.

  RVIB Library & Information Services has the support of the Vision Service of the State Library of Victoria in the provision of reference services. This service is available to all Victorian public libraries. Reference enquiries which cannot be answered from our own resources may be referred to Vision Service staff who will fax information to us to answer the enquiry. L&IS staff put the information into the required format and send it to the requestor.

- RVIB Library &Information Service provides access to major daily newspapers through

its telephone information service, Voice Print.

Text files of a number of major daily newspapers are sent to the RVIB server in the early hours of each morning and these are automatically processed by an application which then makes the papers available for use by Voice Print. Library users can telephone the service, listen to the newspaper read by a synthesised voice, and use the telephone keypad to navigate through headlines, specific sections and specific articles of interest.

The Support Skills Program uses newspapers on Voice Print to teach blind children research skills.

- The RVIB Library &Information Services catalogue of materials for loan is available in print, audio, braille and on computer disk, or , through the RVIB web site which incorporates an online ordering facility. It is also accessible, through Voice Print, with a search facility which uses the telephone key pad, and an ordering facility. Students can also access our catalogue through their school or local library.

- Library &Information Services provides curriculum materials to support students studying at all levels. Materials are sourced from our own collections, from the collections of other special format libraries and through our production facilities.

Materials in audio, braille, large print and e-text are acquired or produced for students with print disabilities studying in mainstream schools.

Legally blind children studying in Victoria may be supported through the RVIB Visiting Teacher Service. Visiting teachers request curriculum materials on behalf of students, and students may also use our library services independently.

Commitment to Braille

Braille is the primary literacy medium for children who are blind and it is fundamentally important to the education of children who are blind. It is readily understood and widely accepted by educators that children, particularly early learners, do not acquire true literacy through the "flat" medium of audio and computer-generated speech but require hard copy texts which they can read, reread and digest at their leisure.

RVIB has recently renewed its commitment to the provision of materials in braille through the adoption of the recommendations of a Committee set up by our Chief Executive Officer to evaluate our provision of services and materials to braille readers, both children and adults.

As a result of these recommendations:

- additional high speed heavy duty embossers have been purchased,

- skilled transcribers now have the flexibility to work from home if their personal circumstances make this easier for them

- A consultant has been employed to develop guidelines for the production and teaching of tactile graphics.

The Future

RVIB Library &Information Services is currently working on providing access for eligible users to the full text of braille files through the online public access catalogue (OPAC) which is available via the RVIB web site.

Preliminary discussions have established that it is feasible to begin planning for libraries and

schools to be provided with facilities to search our catalogue, locate required material in braille, download files for access through a tactile braille display, or emboss the files on the spot and provide students with hard copy when they need it.

We have also begun work on providing access to samples of audio books through the catalogue records on Voice Print, and via the web site.

While the size of audio files currently makes the storage of complete audio books online impractical this may not be the case for ever.

In the planning stages is the establishment of a service between RVIB and schools whereby the school would email notes or other information to RVIB Library & Information Services and we email back a file which is embosser or printer ready.

Technology is providing us with the tools to revolutionise the way we provide information to people with print disabilities - and it is our responsibility to ensure that our users are provided with independent and private access as well as choices about how they access information.

Latest Revision: *June 2, 1999*

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